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A Balanced View of Morocco

WASHINGTON, June 17 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- The following are redacted remarks made by Rev. Rob Schenck, president of the National Clergy Council (NCC), at a news conference held today, June 17, 2010, at the National Press Club in Washington, DC. Rev. Schenck was joined by fellow NCC executive committee members, the Reverend Dr. Kenneth Barney and the Reverend Dr. Harry Thomas.

I am Reverend Rob Schenck president of the National Clergy Council here in Washington, DC, an ordained minister of 28 years affiliated with the Evangelical Church Alliance. The Council represents church leaders from all denominations, Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox and Protestant. We are here to present views of Morocco from the vantage point of religious engagement. Over the last six years dozens of Christian leaders have participated in a meaningful, ongoing dialogue with representatives of Morocco's religious and civic communities, as well as its government. These discussions took place in Morocco and in the United States. They have always been frank and unrestricted.

In a world where religious, ethnic and political tensions are building to explosive levels, Morocco remains an island of peace. Why? Partly because of the natural disposition of its people; a magnificent blend of Berber, European and Arab blood. The Moroccan practice of hospitality is legendary. And there is Morocco's unique practice of Islam.

Like Christianity, Islam has many expressions. Islam in Morocco is a blend of several streams. It is not the severe, distorted, political Islam of extremists and jihadists. It is the diametric opposite.

The Malakite, Suni, in some ways, Sufi-informed Islam of Morocco is peace-centered and non-political. It is extraordinarily accommodating of other religions, particularly Christianity and Judaism.

Since the time I became a Christian, 37 years ago, it has been a generally known fact that Christians are safe in Morocco.

To be sure, there have always been sensitivities and tensions—and episodic breakdowns of trust. As is true in countries such as Israel and Greece, there are laws against coerced proselytism in Morocco. Still, (in Morocco) mature individuals are free to embrace whatever religion they desire.

We can argue over whether there ought to be laws that prohibit proselytism, but that's not why we're here. We're here to deal with the realities of present day Morocco. Notwithstanding laws that may or may not be correctly applied, there remain hundreds—

if not thousands of foreign Christians in Morocco without interruption. They have built trusting relationships with Moroccans; relationships that should not be placed in doubt by actions taken in this country.

Now, here is a very delicate matter. Even when laws have been incorrectly applied, or false accusations made, the consequences do not begin to rise to what they are in other parts of the world. Foreigners accused of violating the laws against proselytism are required to return to their countries of origin. That's a far cry from nations where individuals are held in prisons, beaten, tortured and killed.

In talking with indigenous Christians in Morocco, I was told harassment most often goes no further than a compulsory interview with police over a cup of tea.

Part of successful Christian endeavor is to identify with, understand and work within the customs, traditions and values of others. The Commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself," requires we understand and affirm the feelings, sensibilities and social customs of other people.

Christians, especially my fellow Evangelicals, are not always good at that. In many instances the Moroccans have been more understanding and indulgent of us, than we have been of them.

I believe Morocco deserves commendation for their historic generosity toward foreign Christian(s). Recent events threaten to obscure that strong record.

Based on our many meetings, hours of conversation, meals shared together, exchange of families between our two countries, and formal and informal investigations, the National Clergy Council has determined there is no evidence in Morocco of animus toward foreign Christians; nor is there generalized religious persecution. In fact, to call recent events persecution is to diminish the anguished suffering of Christian foreigners in many other countries.

There are political realities in Morocco—and certain, high-profile foreign Christians have, regrettably, found themselves in the middle with considerable consequences.

My prayer is that in good times and bad, American Christians and Moroccan Muslims come to appreciate more about each other. This has served our two civilizations well for 233 years.

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<http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/a-balanced-view-of-morocco-96584034.html>

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Islam in Morocco

It is a mistake to suggest that Moroccan Islam, and the resultant culture it produces, is anything like other expressions of Islam. Moroccan Islam is virtually unique. It is Malikiite Suni, informed by Sufi spirituality that is, in this case, largely pacifistic. This unusual permutation of Islam lends itself to an extraordinary tolerance—and even interest in—other religions. Peaceful cohabitation with both Christians and Jews is legendary and dates to before Maimonides in 11th Century Andalusia (Berdugo, 2007).

1. [Sufism] is the perfect way to fight fanaticism," one 22-year-old Moroccan, Jaouad Reimani, told *Magharebia*. By standing apart from all the heated debates, Sufism is the expression of moderate Islam, and it doesn't take a position on political issues," said the student, who became involved in Sufism through a music festival in Fes. "It purifies the soul and allows you to approach God in peace.

Retrieved June 15, 2010 from

http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xml/en_GB/features/awi/features/2010-04-08/feature-01?pollresult=yes&answer=no&id=awi-2010-05-03

2. Morocco owes its image of a modern Muslim nation to Sufism, a spiritual and tolerant Islamic tradition that goes back to the first generations of Muslims and has sustained the religious, social and cultural cohesion of Moroccan society for centuries. Sufism provides answers to some of the most complex issues in the contemporary Muslim world, where youth comprise the majority of the population.

Most Moroccans, young or old, practice one form of Sufism or another. As a deep component of the Moroccan identity, Sufism absorbs all members of society, regardless of age, gender, social status or political orientation.

Retrieved June 15, 2010 from

<http://www.thefreeibrary.com/Sufism+as+ youth+ culture+ in+ Morocco.+a0194091063>.

3. Moroccan youth are increasingly drawn to Sufism because of its tolerance, its fluid interpretation of the Quran, its rejection of fanaticism and its embrace of modernity. Young men and women find in the Sufi principles of "beauty" and "humanity" a balanced lifestyle that allows them to enjoy arts, music and love without having to abandon their spiritual and religious obligations.

Sufi orders exist throughout Morocco. They organize regular gatherings to pray, chant and debate timely topics of social and political importance, ranging from the protection of the environment and social charity, to the war on drugs and the threat of terrorism.

Moreover, Sufi gatherings inspire young people to engage in interfaith dialogue, highlighting the universal values Islam shares with Christianity and Judaism -- such as the pursuit of happiness, love of one's family, tolerance of racial and religious differences, and the promotion of peace.

Sufis distance themselves from fundamentalists, whose vision of Islam is a strict and utopian emulation of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, by placing great emphasis on the community's adaptation to the concerns and priorities of modern times. Sufis neither condemn unveiled women nor censure modern means of entertainment. For them, the difference between virtue and vice is determined on the basis of intent, not appearances.

Sufism is so diffuse in Moroccan culture that its role cannot be properly understood if reduced to a sect or shrine: it pervades even those musical trends labeled as "modern" or "Western".

Retrieved June 15, 2010 from

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The National Clergy Council

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Religious Tolerance in Morocco: A History of Acceptance and Mutual Enrichment

The Rabat Protestant Church and other minority religious groups have been operating unfettered by government authorities since the 1970s. Registration allows religious groups to make financial transactions and other plans as private associations and legal entities.

The Government provides tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the observance of the major religions.

The Moroccan annual budget also funds religious instruction in Jewish public schools. The Government has funded several efforts to study the cultural, artistic, literary, and scientific heritage of Jewish citizens, including creating a chair for the study of comparative religions and the study of Latin and Hebrew at the University of Rabat.

The country has the only Jewish museum in an Arab nation.

The Moroccan government has organized numerous symposia among local and international clergy, priests, rabbis, imams, and other spiritual leaders to examine ways to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue.

King Mohammed VI in his capacity as chief religious authority restructured the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to ensure the promotion of moderate Islam and guard against imported Islamic doctrines and extremists preaching in mosques.

Muslim citizens are allowed to study at Christian and Jewish schools.

A small foreign Christian community operates churches, orphanages, hospitals, and schools without any government restrictions. Missionaries who refrain from proselytizing and conduct themselves in accordance with societal expectations largely are left unhindered; however, those whose activities become public face expulsion.

Christians inherit according to the civil law, which reflects the recent change to the family code. Jewish citizens maintain their own separate inheritance law based on Jewish tradition. The Catholic Church may legally perform marriages for citizens who are confirmed Catholics.

In December 2003, the Parliament passed reforms of the Personal Status Code that give women the same rights as men in divorce cases and grant mothers custody of minor children, increase the marriage age from 15 to 18, and impose limitations on polygamy that make it all but impossible to practice. The reforms also abolish obsolete codified traditions, based on the official interpretation of Shari'a, favoring male heirs. For example, grandchildren on the daughter's side of the family may inherit from their grandparents. The reforms are being implemented and have received positive feedback from women's groups. They are predicated on the establishment of

family courts and the creation of a family aid fund, and they rely more heavily on the court system than the previous law.

Foreigners attend religious services without any restrictions or fear of reprisals. Residents of all religions generally say the country is enriched by its centuries-old Jewish minority, and for the most part Jewish citizens lived throughout the country in safety.

Source: U.S. Department of State, 2004 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Washington, DC, (September 15, 2004)



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Members of the National Clergy Council Executive Committee: Committee on Morocco



Rev. and Mrs. Kenneth L. Barney, Sr.

Pastor Kenneth L. Barney, Sr., is a graduate of the Capital Bible Seminary in Maryland with a Master of Arts degree in Theology. In January 2005, Pastor Barney was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity by the National Clergy Council under the auspices of the Mid-Atlantic Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church-USA.

For the past thirty years, Rev. Barney has served as senior pastor of New Antioch Baptist Church of Randallstown, Maryland, a leading African-American congregation in the Mid-Atlantic. In October 2004, Pastor Barney traveled to Morocco with a delegation of evangelical leaders invited by King Mohammed VI. They participated in a Muslim-Evangelical Christian dialogue with Moroccan heads of government, university students, and others. He was the only African-American representative in the delegation. The purpose was to develop friendship between the Muslim community in Morocco and the Christian community of the United States.

Pastor Barney is also an alumnus of the 2008 "Oxford Round Table" held at the University of Oxford, England. He had the honor of participating as a "Discussion Leader" in the Round Table Discussion segment.

Rev. Dr. Harry Thomas



Dr. Harry L. Thomas, Jr., holds a Master of Divinity Degree from Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary and was awarded the Doctor of Humane Letters from the same institution. Dr. Thomas is the founder and executive director of Come Alive International, Inc. which sponsors the annual Creation Festivals, attended each year by more than 100,000 youth.

Dr. Thomas received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Gospel Music Association in 2004.

He serves on the board of the Philadelphia Leadership Foundation, the Supreme Court Historical Society, the Fellowship of Religious Leaders, and the Christian Festivals Association.

Dr. Thomas also founded the "Friendship Fest" in Morocco in 2005 and 2006, where over 200,000 attended from the Muslim and Christian communities in Morocco. He also co-founded Boyer University in Madina, Ghana, West Africa.

Rev. Robert L. Schenck



Rev. Robert L. Schenck is the Founder and President of the National Clergy Council, a network of pastors and denominational leaders who work together to bring Christian moral principles into the conversation and debate surrounding national policy. Rev. Schenck currently serves on the boards of the Evangelical Church Alliance, the Service Club of Capitol Hill, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy, and the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Rev. Schenck has also traveled extensively overseas, including nations such as Morocco and the Sudan, working tirelessly to uphold the dignity of life and safeguard religious freedom as the fundamental human freedom.

He holds ministerial affiliation with both the Evangelical Church Alliance and the Methodist Episcopal Church and is Chairman of the Committee on Church and Society for the Evangelical Church Alliance, the oldest evangelical denomination in America.

Magazines including Life, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report and Christianity Today have all carried reports of his evangelistic efforts. Rev. Schenck has also been the focus of feature stories in the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, the Houston Chronicle and the Los Angeles Times. His biography in the Baltimore Sun was one of the largest features ever published in that newspaper.

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Friendship Festivals: Marrakech, Morocco

At the invitation of the government of Morocco, one member of the Executive Board of the National Clergy Council, Dr. Harry Thomas, participated in a unique music festival in Morocco, jointly paid for by his own organization, Come Alive! Ministries and the Kingdom of Morocco. In early 2004, Dr. Thomas was invited to Morocco to meet with top Moroccan government and religious leaders including Prime Minister Driss Jettou. During the visit, Thomas developed a friendship with then Marrakech Regional President Abdelali Doumou and Marrakech Wali (Governor) Mohamed Hassid, who asked Thomas to present a Human Rights award at a major event to celebrate the achievements of women.

The ceremony, called Khmissa 2004, took place as part of a program that was televised throughout Morocco, to much of the Arab world and also to France. At the ceremony, Thomas presented the award to Assia El Qanadie, a woman who worked with prison reform. During the presentation, Thomas referred to Scripture, stating that those who work with the poor touch the face of God. His remarks were warmly received by the audience.

Shortly after Thomas returned to the United States, his invitation to bring American music to Morocco to promote friendship between the people of the United States and Morocco was confirmed. The Friendship Festivals held in Marrakech, Morocco in 2005 and 2006 were attended by more than 200,000 Moroccans who gathered in front of the stage to see American artists perform alongside some of their favorite Moroccan musicians. The crowds were animated and enthusiastic, responding to invitations to dance, jump and even sing along. "The only thing that was translated were the introductions of the performers", said Dr. Thomas. "The universal language of music translated itself" (Friendship Fest, 2006).

Friendship Fest. (2006). Retrieved June 1, 2010 from <http://www.friendshipfest.com/index.html>

THE NATIONAL CLERGY COUNCIL

Morocco Report

An Overview of Current Tensions Related to the Deportation of Christians from Morocco

Presented by the National Clergy Council and the Committee on Church and Society of the
Evangelical Church Alliance

6/2/2010

This report details the findings of a joint delegation to Morocco including members of the executive Committee of the National Clergy Council and the Committee on Church and Society of the Evangelical Church Alliance. The delegation traveled to Morocco to investigate recent deportations of Christians by the Kingdom of Morocco. The conclusions of the committee represent the results of critical research and personal interviews with civic and religious leaders in Morocco.

Concerns have been raised in many quarters over the recent deportations of various foreigners from the Kingdom of Morocco. Many of the individuals involved are either Christian by faith, or are connected to persons or groups of Christian faith. Moroccan authorities accused most of violating laws against proselytizing. The number of such deportees is estimated to have reached or exceeded 100.

Most of the deportees have thus far denied the allegations against them and a few have vocally challenged the actions. Others have informally appealed to Moroccan officials. One member of congress, Rep. Frank Wolf of Virginia, has announced he will use his position as co-chair of the congressional United Human Rights Commission to hold hearings on the matter scheduled for June 17, 2010.

For the past seven years, the National Clergy Council based in Washington, DC, has facilitated an ongoing dialogue between religious and government leaders in the U.S. and in Morocco on the subjects of religion, religious belief, mutual understanding between cultures, and religious liberty. Shortly after reports of the first wave of deportations reached the United States, National Clergy Council president, the Reverend Dr. Rob Schenck, requested an urgent meeting with the Ambassador of Morocco to the United States, H.E. Aziz Mekouar, to discuss the matter at length.

Ambassador Mekouar extended a warm invitation to Rev. Schenck and the two met at the Embassy of Morocco for more than one hour on March 22, 2010. During this meeting, Rev. Schenck expressed the grave concerns being raised among some evangelicals that the deportations could indicate the commitment of Morocco to advancing the protection of human rights, including the continued expansion of religious freedom, may be slipping.

Ambassador Mekouar acknowledged these concerns and expressed regret at the unfortunate turn of events. As a step toward resolving the concerns, the Ambassador proposed that a meeting with evangelical representatives take place at the Embassy of Morocco as soon as possible. Rev. Schenck accepted the proposal and organized such a meeting. It occurred on March 31, 2010, at the Embassy and lasted more than three hours. Participants included:

- The Reverend Dr. Rob Schenck, president of the National Clergy Council, Washington, DC
- The Reverend Dr. Samuel Goebel, president of the Evangelical Church Alliance International, Bradley, IL
- The Reverend Dr. Kenneth Barney of the New Antioch Baptist Church of Randallstown, Maryland
- The Reverend Patrick Mahoney of the Christian Defense Coalition, Washington, DC
- Karen Prior, Ph.D., Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia

In addition to the above, three representatives of international Christian mission organizations with interests in Morocco were present. These parties asked to remain anonymous because of cultural sensitivities in several of the countries where they are active.

The discussion at the March 31 meeting centered on the question of whether or not the recent deportations from Morocco indicate a change in the country's policies on religious tolerance and/or whether or not these actions indicate a prejudice or even persecution of Christian believers.

Ambassador Mekouar explained carefully that local inhabitants complained to authorities that the deportees had engaged in proselytizing activity. To avoid the spectacle and possible negative outcome of trials, government authorities decided the best compromise was to simply expel the accused from the country. In their minds, deportation eliminated the risk of convictions, jail terms and other onerous penalties.

The members of our delegation adjudged this to be very much in keeping with what we know about Moroccan culture, particularly that of the elite who serve in government and other major societal institutions. There is no indication of animus toward those of Christian faith. In fact, in one instance a very highly placed official whispered that most Moroccan young people aspire to "live like Christians." What he meant was that Moroccan youth emulate their American counterparts in the music, clothing styles and even English slang they adopt as their own.

It is difficult for westerners, especially those in the United States, to appreciate the fact that eastern societies do not value the freedom of the individual as the epitome of virtue. In fact, it can often be quite the opposite. The greatest value is the well-being of the community, whether it is expressed as the family, a village, or even the entire realm.

Such is the case with Morocco. This over one thousand-year-old civilization bases its value systems on communal preservation. Islam is only one factor in a long equation of elements that contribute to identity, stability and security. On this last point it bears examination as to what exactly constitutes Moroccan Islam.

A Brief Review of the Uniqueness of Moroccan Islam and Religious Tolerance

It is a mistake to suggest that Moroccan Islam, and the resultant culture it produces, is anything like other expressions of Islam. Moroccan Islam is virtually unique. It is Malikiite Suni, informed by Sufi spirituality that is, in this case, largely pacifistic. This unusual permutation of Islam lends itself to an extraordinary tolerance – and even interest in – other religions. Peaceful cohabitation with both Christians and Jews is legendary and dates to before Maimonides in 11th Century Andalusia (Berdugo, 2007).

According to the Department of State, "The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and Jewish and Christian communities openly practice their faiths" (Department of State, 2002).

Notwithstanding the belligerence that attended to the reconquest of Spain, and much later tensions created by the occupations of Morocco by both the Spanish and French, Moroccans retain a great respect and even affection for the Catholic influence in this country. Most of the

élite have had extensive contact with Catholics, many having even been educated in Catholic institutions.

According to the State Department, "The Government encourages tolerance and respect among religions. The King sponsored an inter-faith memorial ceremony on September 16 for the victims of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious leaders presided. Prime Minister Youssef and numerous other ministers attended the ceremony, which was held in Rabat's Catholic cathedral." (2002)

Unlike other expressions of Islam, Moroccans are not the least bit hesitant to speak of their deep reverence for Jesus, who is ranked as one of their great prophets. Similarly, Mary, or Miriam, the mother of Jesus, is held in awe.

For years, Morocco has annually organized every May the "'Fez Festival of Sacred Music,' which includes musicians from many countries representing many religions. The Government has organized in the past numerous symposiums among local and international clergy, priests, rabbis, imams and other spiritual leaders to examine ways to reduce religious intolerance and to promote interfaith dialogue" (2002).

At the invitation of the government of Morocco, one member of the delegation from the National Clergy Council, Dr. Harry Thomas, has participated in a unique music festival in Morocco, jointly paid for by his own organization, Come Alive Ministries and the Kingdom of Morocco. In early 2004, Dr. Thomas was invited to Morocco to meet with top Moroccan government and religious leaders including Prime Minister Driss Jettou. During the visit, Thomas developed a friendship with then Marrakech Regional President Abdelah Doumon and Marrakech Wali (Governor) Mohamed Hassad, who asked Thomas to present a Human Rights award at a major event to celebrate the achievements of women.

The ceremony, called Khawass 2004, took place as part of a program that was televised throughout Morocco, to much of the Arab world and also to France. At the ceremony, Thomas presented the award to Assia El Qoudie, a woman who worked with prison reform. During the presentation, Thomas referred to Scripture, stating that those who work with the poor touch the face of God. His remarks were warmly received by the audience.

Shortly after Thomas returned to the United States, his invitation to bring American music to Morocco to promote friendship between the people of the United States and Morocco was confirmed. The Friendship Festival, held in Marrakech, Morocco in 2005 and 2006 were attended by more than 200,000 Moroccans who gathered in front of the stage to see American artists perform alongside some of their favorite Moroccan musicians. The crowds were animated and enthusiastic, responding to invitations to dance, jump and even sing along. "The only thing that was translated were the introductions of the performers", said Dr. Thomas. "The universal language of music translated itself" (Friendship Fest, 2006).

For these reasons and more, it is the conclusion of our delegation that the recent deportations of up to, and perhaps exceeding, 100 foreign Christians from Morocco do not indicate hostility toward those of Christian faith. Rather, it is our opinion that the deportations indicate a growing

alarm among highly placed officials in Morocco that the activities of certain foreign Christians provoked complaints from local communities.

This kind of disturbance in the communal status quo is seen as a portent of destabilization that in turn leads to more serious eventualities, including opportunities for al Qaida in the Maghreb to recruit young men.

May Discussions in Rabat

A second series of meetings on these issues took place May 12, 13 and 14 in Washington, DC and in Rabat, Morocco. National Clergy Council executive committee members spent all day Wednesday, April 12, meeting with staff members and some congressional members of the Lantos Human Rights Commission. Frank discussions were had on all the substantive elements of this problem. Attitudes were mixed, but it was the general consensus that given the potentially volatile political and social situation in Morocco, it would be best to resolve this matter quietly.

This conclusion was reinforced for the members of the Council's ad hoc task force on Moroccan deportations that traveled to the capital of Rabat the night of Wednesday, April 12. This task force was composed of some of the same members of the group that met in March at the Embassy, and others. Most have experience in Morocco with both Moroccan Muslims and foreign Christians living in the country:

- The Reverend Dr. David Anderson, Faith Baptist Church of Sarasota, Florida
- The Reverend Dr. Kenneth Barney, New Antioch Baptist Church, Randallstown, Maryland
- The Reverend Dr. Harry Thomas, Come Alive Ministries International, Medford, New Jersey
- The Reverend Patrick J. Mahoney, Christian Defense Coalition, Washington, DC
- The Reverend Rob Schenck, National Clergy Council, Washington, DC

The National Clergy Council made the proposal for this visit to Moroccan authorities under the condition that the Moroccan government would have no say in the findings of the task force. It was also stipulated that Moroccan authorities would not be given an advance copy of this report. Under these agreed upon conditions, Morocco offered to pay passage for the task group members, along with room, board and ground transportation in country. The offer was accepted with the exception of airfare for Rev. Rob Schenck, who, as president of the National Clergy Council, reimbursed the Embassy of Morocco for the cost of a one-way ticket from Washington, DC (Dulles) to Rabat. He took care of his own return costs directly.

In Rabat, task force members met with representatives of the Christian community of Morocco, officials in the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and the head of the Jewish community. There were no attempts by Moroccan officials to interfere in the discussions in any of these settings. Task force

members had complete liberty to pose any questions they desired and were generally satisfied with the responses they received.

One task force member even had an extended and completely private conversation with a well-placed and highly informed Moroccan citizen well known to the task force member. The Moroccan citizen has long-time connections to and has worked with the government of Rabat.

Everything contained in the conversation reinforced the conclusion the task force was quickly coming to – *that this unfortunate and regrettable series of events was tied to growing fears of an impending attack by extremists on both Moroccans and Americans as well as other citizens.* The government of Morocco has a firm zero-tolerance for such an episode. They would rather bear the brunt of negative public relations tied to deportations, than to have a guest on their soil jailed or physically attacked, perhaps even killed.

On this last point, it is also important to note that Morocco has endured two serious terrorist attacks and there is growing concern, not unfounded, that more may be imminent. High visibility “evangelists” working in an Islamic country could only contribute to such a dreaded eventuality.

Concerns Regarding Insensitivity

On background, it is also a concern to the National Clergy Council, that personnel being deployed to Morocco by certain, mostly evangelical, Christian organizations have not been properly trained or oriented in how to conduct themselves in such a sensitive environment. Some self-proclaimed evangelical “missionaries” feel they have received a unique call from God to enter Morocco and undertake highly controversial and even illegal activity. Part of finding a solution to these tensions requires that evangelical mission groups respect the cultural sensitivities and laws of Morocco in order to continue enjoying the country’s hospitality toward foreigners.

The Department of State is fully aware of those sensitivities. “Since the time of the French protectorate (1912-56), a small foreign Christian community has operated churches, orphanages, hospitals, and schools without any restriction or licensing requirement being imposed. *Missionaries who conduct themselves in accordance with societal expectations largely are left unhindered. However, those who proselytize publicly face expulsion.*”

Islamic law and tradition call for strict punishment for any Muslim who converts to another faith. Citizens who convert to Christianity and other religions sometimes face social ostracism, and in the past a small number have faced short periods of questioning by the authorities. Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the Criminal or Civil Codes; however, any attempt to induce a Muslim to convert is illegal. Foreign missionaries either limit their proselytizing to non-Muslims or *conduct their work quietly*” (2002).

It is a fact that the overt operation of foreign Christians in any Islamic country will remain problematic for both guest visitors and nationals. Growing security threats in the region only add to this tension. Still, large numbers of foreign Christians remain in Morocco and continue many of their same activities. Only those who are perceived to have stepped over a subjective threshold of tolerance have been affected by these recent deportations. The National Clergy Council and the members of the Embassy, Washington and Rabat delegations regret these developments.

At the same time, it is incumbent on us to exhort our fellow evangelicals to do all they can to give proper respect, sensitivity and gratitude to Morocco for its consistent and unrivaled accommodation of foreign Christians.

Sheryl Young, in her article covering the deportations, noted, "Morocco, long considered a vacation haven, has been known as the most progressive Islamic nation – open to Christians, Jews and other faiths who have been free to worship openly – but not to evangelize. It is against the law to proselytize Muslims" (Young, 2010).

It behooves us to admonish our own to be cautious, comprehensive and accurate in assessing the boundaries of working in Morocco, especially as they pertain to laws governing relations between foreigners and Moroccan children. This is an extremely sensitive subject and must be given the utmost attention. It is also our considered and prayerful opinion that individuals working alone, apart from long-time established associations and networks in Morocco, leave themselves vulnerable to being misunderstood and, perhaps, even falsely accused by those with ulterior motives.

Conclusion: Findings of the Committee

The Moroccans acknowledge their actions related to these deportations were flawed and were not conducted with the professionalism, courtesy, and punctiliousness that even they would have liked. This has more to do with the literacy and training deficiencies of both American "mavericks" and Moroccan low-level police officers, some of whom are illiterate.

It takes considerably longer than two months to resolve many of our own domestic disputes, particularly when they involve religion and religious expression. We urge the same patience be exerted in this even more complex matter. Morocco has one of the longest uninterrupted histories of friendship and alliance with the United States (Moroccan American Center for Policy, 2007). It can be credibly argued that without the aid of the Moroccans, the allies may have suffered serious setbacks during the Second World War. There is no doubt more Jews would have surely gone to their deaths without the protection of the Moroccan monarch (Berlugo, 2007).

Even today, the extraordinary cooperation of Morocco with the United States is invaluable to the international war against terrorism and extremism. It is the commitment of the National Clergy Council and like-minded Christian organizations to continue to appeal to the Moroccans in the same way our American Founders did when their similar efforts enlisted a life-long friend and ally for liberty and freedom in the world.

As noted, Morocco is unique in the Muslim world in their tolerance of and appreciation for other religious expressions. Indeed, as acknowledged by the US Department of State, Morocco encourages tolerance and respect among religions.

The current deportations can be directly linked to complaints among Moroccan locals that the individuals concerned were in violation of Moroccan anti-proselytizing laws.

Additionally, investigations by the delegation to Morocco reinforce the conclusions that this unfortunate and regrettable series of events was tied to growing fears of an impending attack by extremists on both Moroccans and Americans as well as other citizens.

Because all these complicated factors are part of this schema, it is our unanimous opinion that the hearings of the Lantos Human Rights Commission, scheduled for June 17, 2010, are unnecessary and may even be counter-productive, placing at risk many who remain quietly in Morocco. We believe the hearings increase the risk of exposing other religious and humanitarian aid groups working in the country to interference by local government authorities. We, therefore, appeal to the members of the Lantos Human Rights Commission to postpone their planned June 17 hearings until all routes to a solution have been exhausted.

Finally, the Kingdom of Morocco has extended an open invitation to Rep. Frank Wolf and other members of the Lantos Human Rights Commission to travel to Morocco to gather facts and discuss these critical concerns in greater detail. Our joint delegation highly recommends this invitation be accepted in lieu of a hearing. We are optimistic that a reasonable and mutually acceptable resolution can result from such a visit.

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Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco
in Washington, D.C.

سفارة المملكة المغربية
ول شنتي

The Ambassador

June 17, 2010

The Honorable
James P. McGovern

The Honorable
Frank R. Wolf

Co-Chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs
2170 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressmen,

On behalf of the Moroccan government, I would like to share with you some thoughts regarding the repatriation procedures taken against the parties involved in proselytizing activities in Morocco.

1. Morocco's Constitution guarantees and protects freedom of opinion and expression. This has been codified in relevant legislation regarding individual and collective public liberties. These rights can be practiced without restrictions. These freedoms are also guaranteed by the international commitments made by the Kingdom of Morocco, whose Constitution enshrines the universally recognized principles of Human Rights.
2. The repatriation measures which concerned, among others, a number of American citizens, solely and exclusively targeted proselytism activities which are clearly and categorically forbidden by the laws of Morocco and the precepts of Islam.

Under Moroccan legislation, these activities are considered a criminal offence. Articles 220 to 223 of the Moroccan Penal Code make provisions for fines and prison sentences for whomever "has forced or prevented a single or numerous persons to practice a faith or to participate in the practice of that faith". The same sentence is provided for whomever "uses means of seduction in the aim of undermining a Muslim's faith or of converting him/her to another religion, either by exploiting his weaknesses or needs, or through the use, to this end, of health or educational establishments, as well as shelters or orphanages".

The inclusion in the Penal Code of references to educational establishments and to orphanages reflects the concern for the impressionability of, and the desire to protect, young children, especially those orphans raised without the normal transmission of their Muslim religious faith through their families. While the reactions to the measures taken by the Moroccan authorities on this matter refers exclusively to the rights of the Americans who were in charge of these children, Moroccan law understandably seeks above all to protect these minors and to preserve the religious faith of their often tragically interrupted family lives.

Given these concerns, there can be no mistake about the position of the Moroccan authorities in this case. The repatriation measures were taken against the concerned parties not because of their Christian faith but because they committed criminal offenses, proven by an investigation

conducted by the Crown Prosecution Office, following formal complaints by parents and close relatives of the children concerned.

Given these circumstances, Moroccan authorities were obligated to fulfill their responsibilities by duly enforcing the pertinent laws. The choice of repatriation, an administrative procedure provided for in national legislation, was selected instead of a criminal procedure, to spare the concerned parties the difficult ordeal, including incarceration and a trial, that would have been the alternative.

As such, and in no way whatsoever, did the repatriation measures breach freedom of worship, which is guaranteed by the Moroccan Constitution. The Moroccan Government ensures the exercise of this freedom throughout Morocco in an equal manner for Muslims, Jews and Christians.

In this matter, the repatriation measures are the logical, legal decision reached after a thorough investigation which established, on the basis of verifiable and substantial evidence, that foreign nationals, under the pretense of conducting charitable actions, had engaged in proselytizing, which is considered a criminal offense under Moroccan law.

3. The Kingdom of Morocco has always been a land of dialogue and exchange, as well as a crossroads where different civilizations, cultures and religions can meet. Moroccan Islam, founded upon values of openness, tolerance and moderation, constitutes a central pillar upholding Moroccan society that needs to be preserved against any efforts to undermine or distort Islam's values and the harmony between the followers of different faiths.

Whenever this positive and peaceful coexistence among the communities of different faiths in Moroccan society is threatened by proselytizing, Moroccan authorities are obliged to act, taking appropriate legal measures, to protect the faiths of these communities.

Similar actions have been undertaken in the last few years against proselytizing activities on the part of Muslim Shiites or Muslim Wahhabis. In these cases, the same type of administrative procedure was followed, for instance in the shutting down of 137 "Diour Al Koran" (Koranic schools) and of the Shiite Iraqi school, as well as in the context of measures taken against the Moroccan association "MALI" (Alternative Movement for Individual Liberties) for public disorder caused during the holy month of Ramadan.

Morocco remains committed to the values of interfaith dialogue, tolerance, freedom of expression, and openness to people of all nationalities. As a sovereign country, it is only reasonable to expect that people who accept our hospitality will observe our laws and respect our society values. On this basis, we continue to extend our friendship to those who come respectfully to Morocco, especially to Americans, and welcome their efforts to assist in the development efforts of Morocco.

Thank you.

Sincerely yours,



Aziz Mekouar